

Trabajo Fin de Grado

Unbridled Imaginations: the Ethical Power of Creativity in Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*

Autor

María Isabel Marqués López

Director

Francisco Collado Rodríguez

Facultad de Filosofía y Letras
2015-2016

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ABSTRACT

This BA dissertation aims to examine some of the textual strategies Michael Chabon uses in *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* to characterize it as a type of Jewish American fiction that engages in the revision of the notions of tradition and identity, in view of the tragic history which reached its turning point after the Holocaust. In this context, the author contemplates an intersection between the self-reflexivity of postmodernism and the ethical possibilities of narrative. All things considered, the main objective of this dissertation is to discuss the novel's ideological position regarding the role of fiction in the articulation of the discourse of alterity. For that purpose, the work examines Chabon's use of metafictional strategies as well as the effects that reading and writing produce within the ontological frame of the main characters.

RESUMEN

Este trabajo de fin de grado se propone examinar la novela de Michael Chabon *Las Asombrosas Aventuras de Kavalier y Clay* en su relación con la tendencia, dentro de la narrativa estadounidense judía, a replantearse las ideas de tradición e identidad como respuesta al trágico período histórico que alcanzó su punto de inflexión tras el Holocausto. En este contexto, el autor contempla una intersección entre la reflexión sobre la propia escritura, propia del postmodernismo, y las posibilidades éticas de la narrativa. Teniendo en cuenta todas estas cuestiones, el objetivo de esta disertación es argumentar la posición de la novela con respecto al papel que juega la narrativa en la articulación del discurso de la alteridad. Con este fin, el trabajo se centra en analizar el uso de estrategias metaficticiales, así como el efecto que ejerce la lectura y la escritura sobre el plano ontológico de los protagonistas.

CONTENTS

0. Introduction	3
1. Identity and the act of writing	5
1.1. Writing and the ethics of Jewish culture.....	5
1.2. Popular culture as discourse of alterity	7
2. The novel's metafictional apparatus.....	9
2.1. A brief introduction to metafiction	9
2.2. The mediation of fiction: responding to reality	12
3. Escape or transformation? On the novel's position about fiction.....	16
3.1. Escapism and the trap of fantasy	16
3.2. Transformation as self-reinvention	19
3.3. Transformation as the encounter of the Other	22
4. Conclusion	24
5. Bibliography	26

0. Introduction

Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (2000; hereafter *Kavalier and Clay*) reframes a Holocaust narrative in an American setting. The novel begins with the exile of Josef "Joe" Kavalier, a Jewish young man and amateur escape artist, from his native Prague during the Nazi occupation to the Brooklyn suburb where his American-born cousin Samuel "Sammy" Clay (born Klayman) lives. Hoping to earn enough money to help his family into the exile from Europe, Joe accepts his cousin's proposal to join the comic book business as a draftsman. Centered on their creation of *The Escapist*, a superhero inspired by Harry Houdini and the Jewish myth of the Golem, the novel reflects on how the lives of the protagonists are altered simultaneously by the reality of the world where they live and by the fictions they imagine.

Although the book does not present a Holocaust narrative at first level, it has faced the critics' skepticism since its publication, being judged as ethically questionable precisely for avoiding to confront directly the tragedy of the *Shoah* through a typically American fantasy of heroism (Podhoretz, 2001; Berger, 2010). On the other hand, some scholars have defended this consciously evasive approach as an acceptable way to cope with a traumatic reality (Behlman, 2004). In the way it recognizes an active role on the part of author or readers to come to terms with their present reality through fiction, this argument provides a starting point for my discussion. Nevertheless, while taking the Holocaust as a point of no return in the history of the Jewish people, the approach in these pages is mostly based on a reading of the novel as a narrative of exile or, in general terms, of displacement. In this sense, the questions this dissertation intends to answer are not concerned with the representation or assimilation of a collective trauma,

but rather, with the understanding and voicing of identity as a response to different experiences of loss and dislocation.

Following this line of argumentation, I intend to examine the role that narrative plays in the dialogue with the reality and cultural identity of Jewish Americans and the regeneration of the old European tradition destroyed during the *Shoah*. The first chapter discusses the implications of imagination and popular culture in the articulation of multiple minority discourses in the context of Jewish and American history. In the second chapter, I introduce the novel's metafictional apparatus as a method to explore the possibilities of reality and fiction. The third chapter, evaluates and tries to respond to the ethical questions the novel sets by examining the notions of escape and transformation, with the aim of proving its engagement in the politics of otherness or alterity.

1. Identity and the act of writing

1.1. Writing and the ethics of Jewish culture

The case of the Jews is probably exemplary of how the construction of a collective narrative has helped a people to survive a long, repetitive history of exile and genocide (Schama, 2015). In the introduction to the book *The Modern Jewish Canon: A Journey Through Language and Culture*, editor Ruth R. Wisse argues that the capacity to make sense of the world and its history through literature has always been one of the bases of Jewish culture: “[R]eading in the Jewish tradition has always merged into a communal discipline [...] A people that intends to participate meaningfully in the world would first have to know itself and be able to represent itself through a creative cultural continuum.” As a result, she continues, “[t]he habit of close reading was cultivated in those [Hebrew] classes, as was the wonder at the magic that words can convey” (2000: 4). To a great extent, their ample written legacy has often provided Jews with a source of inspiration for the questioning and renegotiation of their communal identity.

In addition, the democratic – if, for the longest time, exclusively male – character of their ancestral cult of learning, made it possible for the Jews to constitute a common sense of religious and moral consciousness and develop a practice of critical thinking that transcended their gradual secularization. As Mark Shechner has pointed out in his classic study on post-war American fiction, “[a]mong the first- and second-generation Jews in America, the traditional reverence for learning easily detached itself from the holy books to become a free-floating of new ideas and moral challenges” (1979: 193). In the 20th century, one of the most relevant among those challenges was presented by Lithuanian-born Jewish thinker Emmanuel Levinas, a fundamental figure in the turn to ethics in contemporary philosophy. In his writings, acknowledged to be influenced by

the Bible and the Talmud, he defends the ethical imperative in the encounter with the Other, through the face of an other that calls him. Undergoing this experience of otherness or alterity means a reminder of the fragility of human life and the implied commandment for all individuals to do no harm:

To expose myself to the vulnerability of the face is to put my ontological right to existence into question. In ethics, the other's right to exist has primacy over my own, a primacy epitomized in the ethical edict: you shall not kill, you shall not jeopardize the life of the other. (Levinas in Wurgaft, 2014)

As this dissertation also intends to show, Chabon's novel sides with the judging, creative and liberal disposition that has remained essential for the Jewish people's continuous process of rewriting their identities. Behind their urge to revise their history and reconsider their position in the world, there has been an ethical need to embrace alterity both in the Other and in one's own new definition, aspects that Chabon's novel also develops even if in conceited and metafictional ways.

Taking these notions into consideration, *Kavalier and Clay* must be regarded within the context of the third-generation of Jewish-American writing. This temporal location implies, on the one hand, a personal attempt on the part of these authors to articulate their complex, still hyphenated identity as, above all, American subjects. On the other hand, their work very often reveals an unbridgeable gap from the tradition of their European-born ancestors, and by extension, a feeling of loss for the Yiddish-speaking homeland that was completely destroyed in the Holocaust. However, while forced to reconstruct the past by relying on fiction, these writers are freer to provide new, often postmodern approaches and attitudes to literature and culture (Austerlitz, 2012; Herman, 2011; Sax, 2009), giving proof of the essential role that writing, as the vehicle for the expression of their particular imagination, plays in the course of human history.

1.2. Popular culture as discourse of alterity

In later years, Chabon has responded to his own identity as a third-generation Jewish American – as well as to the experience of all those Jews who survived the Holocaust – through a particular approach to fiction writing. In his essay “Imaginary Homelands,” the writer argues that for him there exists a close relationship between his feeling of cultural dislocation and his decision to adopt the conventions of certain literary subgenres officially classified as popular or “genre” fiction. As he explains, his use of generic forms, ranging from fantasy, adventure or detective narratives, responds to a great extent to his own experience as a modern Jew, constantly “longing for a home that feels irretrievable,” a remote birthplace that he sets in “lands that can be found only in imagination” (2008: 175).

The category of genre fiction, as opposed to the more scholarly “high culture” fiction, is based on a recurrence of specific plotlines, elements and motifs meant to satisfy the low-brow reader’s demands for mystery and emotion. No matter the widespread disagreement regarding this market-based differentiation (Edmonson, 2014; Mitchell, 2015), its formula, based on recalling old myths while addressing new masses, provides a meeting point for the Jewish and the American traditions. As Alfred Kazin already observed many years ago (1966: 405), the Jewish community has had a rather noticeable presence in American popular culture since the beginning of the 20th century. According to this critic, their alliance to the national entertainment scene, from the vaudeville and the music hall theatre to the stand-up comedy, including the comic book industry, accounts for their willingness to voice their own story in a country in which they were still another minority. In so

doing, they applied their own democratic principles, connected to a vision of themselves as common, typical human beings.

For Chabon, on the other hand, this connection between minority consciousness and popular culture also applies to the totality of American society, defined in terms of its multiple forms of identity:

Maybe everybody feels the sense of blinking disorientation [...] Maybe that strangeness is a universal condition among Americans, if not in fact a prerequisite for citizenship. At any rate it is impossible to live intelligently as a member of a minority group in a nation that was founded every bit as firmly on enslavement and butchery as on ideals of liberty and brotherhood and not feel, at least every once in a while, that you can no more take for granted the continued tolerance of your existence here than you ought to take the prosperity or freedom you enjoy. (*Maps and Legends*, 159)

While supporting Chabon's position, I consider that the condition of dislocation that *Kavalier and Clay* represents is probably better expressed by Levinas's ethical notion of alterity. The reason is that this word does not necessarily refer to the differences established between groups, but also between individuals. On the other hand, it brings to the fore the opposition between the I and the Other that has become central in postcolonial and diaspora narratives. A substantial part of this dissertation is, then, devoted to discuss how the notion of fiction – as presented *within* the major fiction of the novel – mediates both in the exposition of alternative perspectives and in the deconstruction of the ancient, quintessential notions of identity and homeland.

2. The novel's metafictional apparatus

2.1. A brief introduction to metafiction

While rendering homage to different forms of popular narratives, the author's playful reworking of the conventions also aims to interrogate the ideological implications of traditional discourse. In this sense, the act of fiction occupies the center of the novel, reflected not only in the main thematic concerns, but in the novel's consciousness of its form. For this reason, it is perhaps more accurate to regard Chabon's work as a sample of "metafiction about genre fiction" (Holbo, 2006: par. 3). The ultimate aim of metafiction is to evidence the fictionality of a story by means of what Patricia Waugh has called "obvious framing devices" (1984: 30), strategies that highlight the presence of those frames that delimit two ontological realms. By suggesting the dissolution of the classic boundaries between reality and fiction, the writer warns readers about the fact that our concept of reality also responds to a preexisting textual construction.

At the same time, metafiction underlines the impossibility to escape narrativization in our own interpretation of the world. Because narratives are always constructed on ideological or cultural bases, it is the aim of the metafictional writer to identify them, decode them, and interrogate their role within a particular context. In its attempt to challenge the reader's belief in the separation between fiction and reality, Chabon's novel relies on a number of strategies that Waugh has called major frame-breaks.¹ In *Kavalier and Clay*, these strategies operate on two major frames: on the one hand, the one that separates the implied reader of the novel from the fictional world where Kavalier and Clay belong, and on the other hand, taking into account the protagonists'

¹ As opposed to minor frame-breaks, which simply draw attention to the structure of the frame in order to persuade the reader of the solidity of the illusion.

status as authors of popular fiction, the one that delimits the world of their creations from their own world.

At a primary level, the novel engages the reader in the playful logic of historiographic metafiction, based on the intertwining of two elements: on the one hand, a realistic discourse that asserts the novel's historical referentiality, usually by mentioning real characters and events and, on the other hand, a series of metafictional strategies that lead us to read our own, long-time static history as yet another story. Although I do not aim to develop too far into this notion in the dissertation, I consider relevant to mention it, as it is on its basis that Chabon's novel operates. According to Linda Hutcheon, historiographic metafiction applies to all those works which display "a theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs (historiographic metafiction) [that] is made the grounds for [a] rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past" (1988: 5).

For that purpose, *Kavalier and Clay* interrogates the alleged factuality of the historical novel by introducing the figure of an editor whose interventions are occasionally registered in the form of footnotes accounting for fictional events and characters or citing fake sources. In addition, other textual documents are included, directly transcribed, presented to the reader as unmediated accounts from the reality of the protagonists' lives: this is the case of the last letter that Joe receives from his mother and he never opens, or the record of Sammy's declaration at court. The fact that these elements stand in between the openly fictional world of the characters and the assumed reality *outside* the narrative is part of the novel's metafictional game. The contrast between the tone of authority that the editor assumes and the fictionality of every detail

he provides,² eventually leads readers to call into question the historical validity of those accounts that they have so far identified as real, and perhaps in turn, to empathize with some of the characters that they know to be fictional.

In the same line, within the diegesis the limits between the world where the protagonists live and the one they imagine disappear at certain moments. This is what happens in the episode which introduces the beginning of Kavalier and Clay's first comic book creation, *The Amazing Adventures of the Escapist*. Opening without any initial indication of its subordination to the main action, the embedded story closes with a reference to its authors, vaguely but recognizably outlined, walking on the streets of the fiction town where their characters live:

The sound of their raised voices carries up through the complicated antique ductwork of the grand old theater, rising and echoing through the pipes until it emerges through a grate in the sidewalk, where it can be heard clearly by a couple of young men who are walking past, their collars raised against the cold October night, dreaming their elaborate dream, wishing their wish, teasing their golem into life. (*Kavalier and Clay*, 134)

On other occasions, a frame-break introduces an action taking place in the main characters' world as if it belonged to a fictional comic-book realm. This is the way in which the novel narrates the frustrated attempt on Joe's life by pro-Nazi journalist Carl Ebling. Following the conventions of the popular genre, the action is presented as a comic book plot introducing a murderous villain called the Saboteur, whom the reader soon identifies with the fictional alter ego of the real character. However, at a certain point, the whole narration reveals itself as Ebling's own counter-fantasy of heroism, which he plans to put into practice in real life:

² The black deletions on some words in the letter, supposedly made by the Nazi Censorship Committee, point to the same direction.

When he arrived at work, it was with the intention of showing Joe Kavalier that while Carl Henry Ebling may be a shiftless bumbler and pamphleteer, the Saboteur is not one to be trifled with [...] How surprising, disturbing, marvelous, strange it is, then, to [...] discover that the performing magician hired for the Saks bar mitzvah is not some moonlighting scribbler but the Escapist himself, the Saboteur's dark idol, his opposite number, masked and fully costumed and wearing in his lapel the symbol of his cursed League. (*Kavalier and Clay*, 331)

Whether it is by representing an act of creation or the fictionalization of one's own actions, both these episodes give proof of the instability of the notion of reality when it comes filtered through the author's active imagination. Through the introduction of major frame breaks at two levels of the story, the novel subscribes to a basic post-modernist concern, which Susana Onega has identified³ as: "the advisability of seeing the everyday reality as a construct similar to that of fiction, and as such, similarly 'written' and 'writable'" (1989: 75. Emphasis added). On this basis, the novel's explores the possibilities of fiction by showing how the protagonists, playing roles as both *readers* and *authors*, rely on different forms of narrative, which helps them to understand and cope with reality.

2.2. The mediation of fiction: responding to reality

The role of fiction as mediator in our understanding of reality is first highlighted in the characterization of the protagonists. In both cases, the reality conveyed through their focalization is filtered by a distinct cultural background, captured in a number of myths, (hi)stories and anecdotes. Joe's romantic, mythical imagination is shaped by the Golem of Prague and by the legends of Houdini that his equally legendary teacher Bernard Kornblum tells him. In the same way, Sam's vast recollection of American pulp

³ In reference to one of the most outstanding metafictional novels, John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*.

mythologies, like the extraordinary circus stories provided by his absent father, shape his magnifying and self-parodic genius from an early age.

Similarly, the influence of fantasy is also reflected in their respective responses to reality as creators. In the case of Joe, he contemplates the possibility that his fictional battles against the Nazis can have a real effect in reality. This idea is synthesized in the title of the third episode of the novel, “The Funny-Book War,” which opens with a vivid representation of Joe’s creative experience:

His ears still ringing with artillery shells, screaming rockets [...] He had been drawing, painting, smoking cigarettes, and nothing else for much of the past seven days [...] It was six o’clock on a Monday morning in October 1940. He had just won the Second World War, and he was feeling pretty good about it. (*Kavalier and Clay*, 165)

This passage, which reads as a declaration on the author’s unconscious involvement in his own fantasy, mirrors the description of Sammy’s intense interaction with his stories. As the editor of a third-rate comic-book publication, his intense involvement in his work translates into a personal reaction against the disillusionment and frustration of adult life:

He was a furious, even romantic, typist, prone to crescendos, diminuendos, dense and barbed arpeggios [...] He had reduced two typewriters to molten piles of slag iron and springs since his return to comics, and when he went to bed at night his mind remained robotically engaged in its labor while he slept, so that his dreams were often laid out in panels. (*Kavalier and Clay*, 486)

Both these episodes show the act of creativity, in particular the “writing” of fantasy, as a necessary response to a particular anxiety related to the condition of dislocation and alterity. This idea is symbolized by the figure of Harry Houdini. As a Jewish artist living in the United States, Houdini embodies everything that the protagonists have in common. He is Joe’s main referent during his personal and artistic

development, particularly when he must cope with the reality of exile and later, of estrangement. On the other hand, Sammy also relates to Houdini in his ambitious nature as a young man and the consciousness of his own difference: “his dreams had always been Houdiniesque: they were the dreams of a pupa struggling in its blind cocoon, mad for a taste of light and air. Houdini was a hero to little men, city boys, and Jews; Samuel Louis Klayman was all three” (3). As the symbolic connection between the two young creators, Houdini is behind the protagonists’ creative partnership:

IN LATER YEARS, holding forth to an interviewer or to an audience of aging fans at a comic book convention, Sam Clay liked to declare, apropos of his and Joe Kavalier’s greatest creation [the Escapist], that back when he was a boy, sealed and hog-tied inside the airtight vessel known as Brooklyn, New York, he had been haunted by dreams of Harry Houdini. (*Kavalier and Clay*, 3)

The previous passage, corresponding to the opening of the novel, constitutes a statement on the power of imagination and story-telling. Presented to the reader as part of an anticipated episode, Sammy’s memory does not exactly reproduce the present of narration because it is mediated by his subjectivity. By pointing to that displacement, the narrator places emphasis on the individual’s capacity to reimagine reality through narrative (Robbins, 2009). This practice is equated to Houdini’s escape acts, which Sammy compares with Superman’s metamorphosis, “to me, Clark Kent in a phone booth and Houdini in a packing crate [...] You weren’t the same person when you came out as when you went in. [...] It was never just a question of escape. It was also a question of transformation” (3).

As the model for Kavalier and Clay’s hero, the figure of Houdini conveys the idea that narrative can constitute an act of magic. Nevertheless, for the most part of the novel, it is actually associated to the idea of escapism. In contrast to transformation,

which refers to the individual's ability to question reality after understanding its constructiveness, escape implies a conscious denial of it by turning to fantasy. All things considered, the confrontation between escapism and transformation introduces the novel's debate on the goals and the ethics of imagination in the narrative representation of reality. In the next chapters, I aim to interrogate what either attitude implies and which one eventually prevails in the novel by examining the way the fiction by Kavalier and Clay's is presented – mainly, to the authors themselves.

3. Escape or transformation? On the novel's position about fiction

3.1. Escapism and the trap of fantasy

In a rather controversial article, Lee Behlman argues that, not aiming to ignore the extremity of the Holocaust, Chabon's novel intends to defend escapism in popular culture as an acceptable response to collective trauma. This critic considers that as "a turn away from history [...] fantasy may also act as an interruption to memory, a holding action against the incursions of the past" (71). As the following pages show, the novel's position towards the idea of escapism seems to be more complex than Behlman's opinion indicates, as it suggests the futility of any attempt to apply the parameters of fiction to effect a change in real life. As a result, Joe's enthusiastic feeling of creative agency as he writes "the funny book war" proves to be a form of self-deception:

The surge of triumph he felt when he finished a story was always fleeting, and seemed to grow briefer with every job. [...] The Escapist was an impossible champion, ludicrous and above all *imaginary*, fighting a war that could never be won. (*Kavalier and Clay*, 168. Emphasis in the original)

In the same way, as a desperate reaction against his impossibility to save his family from the Nazis, Joe gradually assimilates the role of his protagonist. At the same time as he recreates in the violence of the battle scenes between the Escapist and the Nazi villains, in his own world frame he starts to engage in fights against the German-born citizens of New York. Later, when he learns about his father's death, he instantly decides to join the Army. This plan, initially frustrated by his cousin's intervention, is eventually put into practice after the ship expected to bring his young brother Thomas to America sinks, following the attack of a German U-boat. From this moment on, the

novel problematizes the idea of escapism as the goal of fantasy. In assuming the role of his own comic-book hero, Joe applies a black-and-white pattern that justifies the exercise of violence against the enemy. In search of a sense of relief against his survivor's guilt, he completely drifts away from his obligation towards the other and, pursuing his revenge, he ends up killing a German civilian. However, right after realizing that the man is dead, the memory of all the deaths that have haunted him so far returns, as the tragic outcome of his self-*herofication*:

Nothing that had ever happened to him, not the shooting of Oyster, or the piteous muttering expiration of John Wesley Shannenhouse, or the death of his father, or internment of his mother and grandfather, not even the drowning of his beloved brother, had ever broken his heart quite as terribly as the realization [...] that he was hauling a corpse behind him. (*Kavalier and Clay*, 465)

As a result of his escapist tendency, at first Joe is unwilling to discern between reality and fiction. This explains his attitude when reading all the unopened letters from his beloved Rosa Saks: “The letters were like fragments from an old-fashioned novel — they contained not only a mysterious birth and a questionable marriage, but a couple of deaths as well” (457). By fictionalizing the facts, he aims to escape not only from the tragic reality that they account, but also from his own guilt after having abandoned the people on whom he once depended. However, after killing the German he realizes that this is an impossible task. As the novel insists on “the divide between fantasy and actual violence” (Chute, 2008: 284), escapism reveals itself as a trap, mainly because this particular fantasy has been constructed with a certain political agenda. After Joe is finally rescued by the Allies, the novel ironically highlights the contrast between the protagonist's unbearable guilt and the military recognition that he receives once “his claim to have killed the *lone enemy* occupant of a German Antarctic base” is confirmed (467, emphasis added). The implied criticism towards his decision to kill other men

points to the text's subversive attitude against traditional war discourse, enacting dividing myths of courage and heroism.

I contend that, in criticizing escapist fiction for implicitly enforcing a clear-cut distinction between the I and the Other (always presented as the war enemy), the novel aims to propose alternative discourses, free of ideological bias. As argued in the first chapter of this dissertation, the defense that Chabon makes of popular culture is ultimately aimed to create a sense of community. The historical significance of superhero narratives in responding to the collective anxieties of the country during the Second World War is expressed, not only in the massive success of Kavalier and Clay's creations, but also in the way the readers turn their backs on comic books after the outcome of the war: "The defeat of those actual world-devouring supervillains, Hitler and Tojo, along with their minions, had turned out to be as debilitating to the long-underwear hero trade as the war itself had been an abundant source of energy and plots" (484). Actually, in the context of the troubled Golden Age America the novel imagines, the Escapist succeeds in capturing the imagination of both the Jewish children who demand an escape artist to perform in their Bar Mitzvah and the German American youths whom Joe actually fights in the streets. As a result, the novel defends popular culture as a collective space that allows for the assimilation of all forms of alterity.

3.2. Transformation as self-reinvention

This work also argues that the main problem that the novel underlines is the negation of alterity through a series of totalizing narratives that support a reality from which it is ultimately impossible to escape. As Christoph Ribbat has remarked, Chabon “is careful not to turn the story [...] into just another episode of the American Dream” (2005: 207). Perhaps, there is even an intention to underscore the two-faced basis on which the Dream is *constructed*. In the same way as Joe is not successful in saving any member of his family, annihilated under a regime of hatred and intolerance, Sammy continuously fails to adapt to a society that still stigmatizes him as a Jewish “Other” (Levine, 2006) and, in addition, condemns his sexual orientation. In sum, the story emphatically shows the separation between a bitter reality and an escapist fiction, while the book’s ultimate implications adhere to the politics of postmodernism in suggesting that the limits that the world imposes on the characters (and, thus, also on the readers) prove to be based on narrative constructions. In this sense, mirroring the war hero ideal of American masculinity – ironically portrayed in fiction by Sammy’s homosexual partner Tracy Bacon –, the Nazi propaganda that Carl Ebling collects in the offices of the Aryan American League and the pastoral documentary about the life of the Jews in the Terenzin ghetto that Joe hears one day on the radio constitute discourses of legitimization of the Holocaust. On this basis, what the different frame-break strategies, earlier examined in this work, represent is not the possibility of escaping from reality, but of admitting everybody’s right to interpret and represent it. It is this realization that allows for transformation.

The possibility of transformation through fiction in the novel has two main objectives: on the one hand, the recognition of one’s own capacity to adapt to a reality that continuously changes; and, on the other hand, the discovery of the Other in a series

of points of suture between the narrative structures that conform different understandings of the world. As the novel suggests, both ideas are ultimately interconnected, as shown in the development of the protagonists' lives.

Having secretly returned to New York, Joe starts to work obsessively on a new comic book entitled *The Golem*, in which he imagines the destiny of the people that he left behind when he escaped from his hometown. This extended graphic novel, which depicts with an extreme sense of realism the lives of the Jewish community before their final annihilation, departs from the popular comic book imagery and discourse that he had displayed in *The Escapist*. His decision to make the Golem the protagonist of the story – echoing his rejected first draft of a “Superman,” conceived before his creation of the *Escapist* – translates into his aim to locate himself in the Jewish tradition and, at the same time, as Andrej Gasiorek has observed, “to pay homage to a community that was destroyed and to insist that there is a continuity between destruction, earlier Christian pogroms, and the Holocaust” (2012: 887).

His aim to create continuity through narrative⁴ applies also to his own experience as an exile. It is after having rescued the memory of his people that he can accomplish his transformation by recognizing that he can construct a new homeland. By the end to the novel, Joe, standing in front of the grave of the magician in New York, has a vision of his escape teacher Bernard Kornblum – whom he already knows to be dead. After Joe asks him what he should do, the old man replies, “For God’s sake [...] Go home” (608). In this significant episode, Houdini eventually stands, like the Golem, as a transformative force that enables the protagonist to keep connected to the past while

⁴ The notion of narrative continuity between the past and the present as the main goal in the account of a memory is also one of the main concerns of Trauma Studies, a framework that has already been applied to the novel in the interpretation of this particular episode. According to this approach, Joe’s struggle to work through the collective trauma of the Shoah accounts for his successive experiments with different narrative forms and conventions within the comic book logic (Chute, 2008).

projecting his ‘roots’ – or, reproducing the terminology of diaspora studies, ‘routes’ – towards the future.

To make things more complicated, the novel eventually rescues the possibility of escapism through fantasy when, close to the end of the novel, Joe looks with nostalgia at his extensive collection of comic books:

Having lost his mother, father, brother, and grandfather, the friends and foes of his youth, his beloved teacher Bernard Kornblum, his city, his history – his home – the usual charge leveled against comic books, that they offered *merely an easy escape from reality*, seemed to Joe actually to be a powerful argument on their behalf. He had escaped, in his life, from ropes, chains, boxes, bags, and crates, from handcuffs and shackles, from countries and regimes, from the arms of a woman who loved him, from crashed airplanes and an opiate addiction and from an entire frozen continent intent on causing his death. The escape from reality was, he felt – especially right after the war – a worthy challenge. (*Kavalier and Clay*, 575. Emphasis in the original)

Nonetheless, the idea acquires a different value, for now the protagonist has learned to take control of fantasy. In his ironic revision of his own history as an “escapist,” he puts at the same level the triviality of his escape acts and the sublimity of his actual escapes from death and from the possibility of a new life. In so doing, he demonstrates that, considering how tragically life can sometimes equate fiction, an escapist turn through fantasy, as art, can be an acceptable move as long as it eventually allows for recognition, return and, finally, regeneration:

That was the magic – not the apparent magic of a silk-hatted card-palmer, or the bold, brute trickery of the escape artist, but the genuine magic of art. It was a mark of how fucked-up and broken was the world – the reality – that had swallowed his home and his family that such a feat of escape, by no means easy to pull off, should remain so universally despised. (*Kavalier and Clay*, 576)

3.3. Transformation as the encounter of the Other

The transformative effect of fiction is also manifested in the way it can lead readers to encounter the (notion of the) Other. As an illustration of this idea, reading the narrative of *The Golem* leads Sammy to reconsider his own escapist approach to life as expressed in his writing, particularly his autobiographical epic entitled “American Disillusionment,” as well as his long-time exhausted literary ambitions:

‘A comic book novel,’ Sammy said. He thought of his own by-now legendary novel, *American Disillusionment* [...] It was the autobiography of a man who could not face himself an elaborate system of evasion and lies unredeemed by the artistic virtue of self-betrayal. It had been two years now since his last crack at the thing, and until this very instant he would have sworn that his ancient ambitions to be something more than the hack scribbler of comic books for a fifth rate house were as dead, as the saying went, as vaudeville. (*Kavalier and Clay*, 543)

His realization places literature at the center of the action, as an ethical vehicle for self-identification and mutual understanding. It is in this episode that Sammy admits his homosexuality to Joe and gradually he becomes aware that he must also accomplish an act of transformation.

Not aiming to idealize reality, the novel presents Sammy as yet another victim of intolerance, particularly of the homophobic anxieties of postwar America. When called to declare at the subcommittee which accuses him of promoting homosexual relationships in comic books, the novel directly reproduces the dialogue between Sammy and the Senator in the manner of a script. Ironically, while appealing to the veracity of the text by presenting it as the official transcript, it is suggested that this apparently unmediated representation also fails to convey the truth, for Sammy eventually lies about his condition, as he actually keeps doing in his everyday life. In this sense, while questioning the possibilities of a realistic form, the novel also engages

in the discourse of alterity by distinguishing between Sammy's different attempts to come to terms with his homosexuality, which run parallel to Joe's responses to the loss of his family. First he introduces platonic homoerotic relationships between the heroes and their sidekicks. However, this form of escape through a comic book fantasy proves completely inefficient, for not only does he fail to go unnoticed, but also to be "true" to himself. Then, this is something that, apparently, he expects to achieve once he decides to move to Los Angeles and start off as a TV scriptwriter. Although the traditional associations between this city and the ideas of artificiality and simulation may suggest the character's necessity to keep playing a role in society, his move responds to a search for a new "homeland" in accord with his newly acquired identity. At the same time, it also implies a redefinition of his roots in adapting his art to new channels of popular culture. In the end, in its constant exploration of the possibilities of realism and fantasy to represent the protagonists' plights, the novel eventually shows that the truth depends on the individuals' capacity to understand their position in the world and in history. Over and above, transformation means to embrace the idea of alterity by adopting narrative and art as sites of self-discovery and interpersonal connection.

4. Conclusion

The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay illustrates a common quality in contemporary Jewish American writing, based on the constant interrogation of culture and history. Paradoxically, in so doing, it maintains the same critical and ethical approach that has always characterized the Jewish people. As Derek Parker Royal contends in the introduction to *Unfinalized Moments in Jewish American Literature*, despite the wide variety of representations that they provide, Jewish American authors equally take part in an “always/already process of (re)definition” (2004: 8). This attitude, the critic also argues, finds a parallel in that of their characters. As I hope to have shown in this dissertation, the novel reacts against pre-established, essential definitions of cultural identity by constructing a metafictional discourse based on the protagonists’ status as authors. Through a series of deconstructivist strategies, the book presents the act of narrative – and, in the same line, artistic expression and imagination – as the basis of human reality, allowing its protagonists to respond to the world as consumers and producers of different forms of fantasy.

This textually subversive, typically postmodernist, attitude towards reality goes, in this case, together with a sense of ethics frequently associated to Jewish cultural tradition. Taking the novel’s self-referential style as a starting point and examining the development of the characters, this dissertation has intended to explore the ethical debate that the novel opens regarding the way fiction can shape humans’ actions in real life. Quoting from the beginning of the novel, I have argued that the function of escapism can prove deceitful if it leads the individual to embrace fantasy to the point of assuming the ideological model that it encourages and forgetting about one’s moral responsibility towards the Other. In turn, escapism can only be defended when one

becomes conscious of the limits that reality imposes and ultimately pursues an ethical aim that I have identified with the function of transformation. This notion applies both to the individual's relation with his or her self and with the others. In both cases, it calls for the understanding that narrative and artistic expressions enable the understanding of one's own "unfinalized" nature (Royal, 2004: 8). This idea synthesizes human capacity to constantly recreate cultural and personal identities while conceiving their connections with tradition and with the Other.

To conclude, quoting directly from one of Kavalier and Clay's narratives, Chabon's novel underlines the belief that "there is no force more powerful than that of an unbridled imagination" (272). Having received so much critical acclaim – including the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in the year 2001 – for or despite its critical and deviant approach to Holocaust history, *Kavalier and Clay* points to the need to reconsider the possibilities, limits and, above all, responsibilities of contemporary fiction. Further research on the novel should, in one way or another, explore and discuss the way fiction mediates in different areas of human life, for instance history. As I have indicated earlier, an approach strongly based on Linda Hutcheon's notion of historiographic metafiction can still provide additional and enlightening conclusions on the narrative intersections between Jewish and American representations of the past.

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